

RETRENCHMENT

Michael McClung

Dedicated to my family and friends

If nearly everything I'd ever written hadn't been destroyed, I probably never would have put this little chapbook together. Friends had kindly kept things I'd given them to read, and they gave me back the few survivors that make up most of what you hold in your hand. Seven poems are all that remain of dozens of works. The rest of what fills this collection has been written since August, 1999.

I've learned a bitter lesson: What is not shared may be lost forever.

Michael McClung, November 1999

Lori, From Memory

I remember pale skin,
Brown hair, luminous blue eyes
I remember the precise tilt of her nose
and the luscious curve of her lower lip
I remember when she was far too thin
I remember her tears of impotent rage
and I remember the front teeth of her smile.
I remember her in cutoffs
I remember her in white teeshirts
and I remember her in nothing at all,
God help me.

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Lori, From Memory

Dewey Street

Some Viennese waltz
on the radio,
some burst of joy
from that long dead city
of shrunken heads.
Sometimes despair becomes inbred.

No mail comes today.
No mail will come tomorrow.
This house, though inhabited
is vacant.
We would only grow weary
of Advo Asks and supermarket circulars.

But consider for a moment
actually listening to the waltz--
if there were the smell of patchouly
in the air, if we drank red wine
and ran giddily through the garden:
Consider it a moment,
then murder frivolity.
Let our sodden silence reign.

D.C. Suite

i.

A view of hills. Later, strong light.
That's where it begins.
Taking in the sights on a day without the wind.
A November without wind.
Tangled traffic squeals and bleats.
Hills. Strong light. No wind.

Not monuments or power centers,
not memorials or tombs.
This city built on coffee rings
and trees in death's Autumnal bloom.
A view of hills. Strong light
through wrought iron grilles.

ii.

And night being what it is,
and fall eclipsed, and fall erased,
we gathered up our human hearts
and clipped and pared, and pruned and placed
them in the cradle of the world
that the masonry and history had finally unfurled
and in a dark a dim-lit bar
we doted on the cuttings,

the forced growth. While politicians, publicans
rehashed the latest hot debate
we breathed warmth on our tapered lives
in crowded rooms in a public place.
You, and you and me
fragile in our revelry.

iii.

A view of hills outside the brisk hotel
and on them graves and markers standing still
and cold and quiet, quite unnoticed 'till
that last day when Autumn meekly fell
down amongst the litter of the leaves.
Strong light from yellow lamps that night
cast stark and slender shadows hard against
leaf choked cold cracked pavement, imprisoning
th cold wet season beneath a wrought iron fence.
I never did give voice to what it might have meant.

An Intemperate Climate

Strong silence squats in places gone for good
wind blows through these rooms and makes no sound
water rushes by somewhere outside
a grackle winds the motor of the world.
In stillness shallow breathing I prefer.

Rather than commune with you, defer-
no half measures, shiny beads of glass
nothing to distract the eye from truth
nothing to coat the dread and cold of loss.
Preferring this to simpleton obtuse.

Preferring open eyes at midnight and beyond,
staring through dark towards the ticking clock
and bedsheet numb and trailer creak to -
to anything at all.
At two a.m. the pipes moan fearful polyglot;
the wind could swing the heartache if it would,
but so will not.

In empty rooms the silence is as varied and as hard
as thoughts at two and three a.m. awake in sleeping
world
and severance is bitterer than ever guessed to be:
Moonlight wanes out in the pine and also there,
in company,
the taste of some Great Poison that leaves its
victims live.

Fayetteville, N.C.

When the simple gray sky hunkers down
over this painted, frozen smile military town
and lights come on as day at last gives up --

This Friday, as fresh faced soldiers drink way
their mid-month pay and ogle topless dancers,
I want to say I know, but I don't have the answers.

The elderly are drinking tea at the Haymont grill
and ordering from the daily specials; down the hill
down the hill a mile away at Rick's the girls are
working, flesh

rubbing up against the rent money.

Arkansas

The bell jar feel
The gritty eye
The courting caffeine cramps--
The wail of a lost soul dj
In Little Rock
Playing The Clash at 4 a.m.;
This state dropping away into inky black
Behind.

When This House

The words in jet black printer's ink
In bold and plain, italicized
The speeding, still-sharp moving eye
Stops, lingers, again moves on-
The thick columns, thin paper
The codification of the world
In noun and adjective and verb
And the smoke, and the almost pleasant
Half-nostalgic smell of cigarettes and beer.
A Sunday ritual.
No one will ask 'What happened here',
No one removed would care to know
This house where every mote of dust
Foreordained, falls to place.
The morning turns to afternoon with stately,
Unassuming grace
With windows cracked the Autumn cool comes in,
Turns once and slips into the space
That otherwise is bare.

If I could simply stand here, or bend and stretch
out on the couch, or wait and bide and stand aside
as seasons dig their shallow graves and strut
and stride, then kneel and crouch... With pattern
and plush and four warm walls to weather and to
ride them out, to watch the days decline and fall-
instead I stride and pace and pause
and wear out the carpet in the hall.

I scan the dictionary for elusive, half-remembered
words,
repeat the wittiest lines from conversations that
I've heard
- to the weather, to the walls -
But it starts and stops, tomorrow too
begins its final fall. And I still want to know.
When this house - was like coming home
When the reward was to arrive to you,
to us, to it all -
Now the consolation, to remain.
When these hours - spent with you -
were music, not the weather vane
creaking in an Autumn breeze,
another rusty fall.

Words Like Water (For J.S.)

the lovely, ponderous weight
of bare breast
full and heavy
soft and yeilding to the touch
of trembling fingers
trembling, worshipping hand
and mouth
and trembling, timid heart

how beautiful you are
perched above me
hair falling all around your face
your hair framing my face
like a tent
how beautiful and gentle
and how my heart
halves and heals
with each beat
with each beat
the sight of you
tears me down
and rebuilds me anew
...

And words like water
pass my parched lips
now that you are gone,
so very long gone.
All the words
that wouldn't come
when it was me
and thee.

The Reading

And it is dangerous, unhealthy
to think of you and your strong,
curiously quavering recitations
rolling over me, their meat, their
meaning blurred, unfocussed by
exhaustion; the texture of lovely,
lonely words unfolding like a warm blanket
of sound on a cold All Souls Eve.
Dangerous, wanting to wrap your
words around me
and tumble down to sleep
in that soft, battered chair
among strangers.
Dangerous in the way all things
beautiful are dangerous, the sense of loss
when beauty fades, leaving only
the silence after
and your newly acquired need.

To ---

Your breast
soft mound of smooth flesh
surmounted by pebbled peak
means more to me
than any distant memory
of warmth, of comfort, of joy;
the past pales before the glory
of this least part of you
my love.

This house has grown too large around me
the stairs too wide and steep.
You were the mistress of this house,
from mailbox clear to compost heap --
I've turned into one of your memories,
like all your bric-a-brac I keep because
I don't know what to do with it, to do,
finally, with me. What do I do with me?

This time of year your lips were chapped
and cold, and soft between my teeth.
This time of year I scan through C
and turn another leaf.

Deluge

There, on the hill
see wind beat the grass
down with a will
in the night, the sodium streetlight
illuminating the falling rain like an etching
in neon, in pain.
This is the storm season,
these are dark hours where we search, in vain
for reason or an end to the ache
that has always remained vague.
You stand on the porch
looking out to where we
have walked, he and I,
where we wait, hesitantly in the wet
for the other to say whatever there is to say.
There is nothing to say.
You stand on the porch
hip against the rail in your fresh spring dress
in love with him
in love with my rain soaked hair.

Brokensong

And here's fennel for you and rosemary
I can't remember quite what they're for
poor Ophelia not withstanding, no longer
standing in the brook, no longer standing in-
Here's some poseys I picked from the lot
in the country, they're a little withered
now and some bluebonnets and a yellow rose
you gave me from your Memaw's garden
I pressed it be careful it crumbles

And here's a song I fashioned for you
I'm not quite sure of the tune but it's
a good one, it could be a good one

Here's the picture you painted it's
a nice one I think but a little sad and
here's a picture of you and me at the
Nash it must have been my birthday
here's some dates and pomegranates
careful of the seeds

Here's a sunflower I found in a vacant
lot next to the house on Dewey it was taller than
me but I cut the stem
Here's a copy of Venus and Adonis
from a mean little thriftstore a '31 edition
Here's a cufflink from the tux you wore
that night you matched me and made everyone talk
here's the clay pitcher you made it's been
sitting on my brother's dresser for years
here's one of the gloves you wore the night
it snowed outside the library
here's a lock of your hair when it was gold
I found it lying on the bathroom floor
I hid it from you then
I kept it from you then
Here's a sketch I drew of you sleeping
and the sketch you drew of me sleeping
Here's a song for you I'm sorry it's so broken

Shantih as the man said
shantih shantih

'The peace that passeth understanding' --
Shantih.

You loved the sparkling words
hooked each to each
bead by shiny bead
smoothly thought to thought
you loved them and their order
calmly proclaiming the irrational.

You could smell it on the bed
that soft insinuating scent
that unbelievably potent magic
on the pillow, in your hair
in the mass and riot of clothes
strewn all across the floor
I'm sorry the strand has broken
the string scattered across the floor
Shantih

and it was a stronger scent than
any that came after and all that came before
Shantih

and somewhere where will and purpose meet
and plot and will and purpose join
and add to Inevitable- Visible- Dark-
in that smooth lake behind the golf course
the snag-roots and bottom-slime
the headlights on the branches of the twisted pine
along with will and purpose were there sirens
almost certainly not at first
almost definitely not for a while
and after, the ambulance drove away silent
Shantih

Tru-la, you would sing, tru-la-la
oranges and lemons and thee, and thee-
Shantih

in the kitchen me in bottoms you in the top
in the morning the cotton worn and warm and soft
in the kitchen you'd move the typewriter aside
to make room for the plates
and the coffee that was mostly for smell
in the kitchen in the morning me in drawstring
bottoms you in the three button top-
Shantih, as the proud little man said-
but the beads are strewn across the varnished floor-
shantih shantih
I'm sorry I'm so broken.